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Carter and the Tooth Fairies

His Foreign-Policy Claims Are Full of Make-Believe, Empty of His Failures

BY STEF HALPER
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Americans listened closely Tuesday as President Carter gave his midterm State of the Union address. For those who believe in tooth fairies, Carter's speech was, perhaps, wonderfully reassuring.

Carter's failure to conclude a Mideast settlement, to initial a SALT II treaty and to moderate the recent price increases of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries were brushed aside. Further, he didn't mention the biggest foreign-policy failure in a decade—the collapse of Iran as we have known it, and the probable hobbling of America's strategic and economic interests in that turbulent region.

Nothing better reveals the continuing incoherence of Carter's thinking than the Administration's tragic and now-disastrous policy toward Iran.

Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's government, though guilty of human-rights abuses, has been the linchpin of American policy in the Persian Gulf and, indeed, throughout the Mideast.

For more than three decades, the United States invested enormous military, diplomatic, economic and intelligence assets in protecting the so-called Northern Tier—that vast arc of countries stretching from the Dardanelles to the gates of India.

To protect that region, American Presidents took decisive action. In 1946, Harry Truman forced the Soviets out of a virtual occupation of Iran's northwestern province of Azerbaijan, and he did so as part of a coherent strategic policy that came to be known as "containment."

That policy viewed the Soviet Union realistically as an adversary with a combative ideology antagonistic to the West and with the power to probe the vulnerable nations on its borders. Containment called for the United States to assist pro-Western nations willing to resist Soviet aggression or internal subversion with economic, diplomatic and, if necessary, military aid.

In the case of Iran, the results were dramatic. The United States, after returning the shah to power with the help of the CIA in 1953, went on to sell more than \$100 billion in goods and services over the next two decades—putting the trade-balance figures in the black for many of those years. Iran supplied us with 7% of our oil imports—a figure that was growing until the recent disturbances. Moreover, one barrel out of five of the oil imported to the United States, Western Europe and Japan came from Iran.

Today, with oil production curtailed—even if Saudi Arabia and other major oil-producing states make up the loss—the safety margin for

the West is gone. A fire, sabotage or production strike, or even a severely cold winter, could lead to chaos.

In the past decade, parallel U.S.-Iranian strategic interests took concrete form in the shah's commitment to protect the Persian Gulf and Red Sea routes that carry over half the oil used by Western nations.

Moreover, the shah's generous supply of oil for Israel and his protection of the small and highly vulnerable oil-producing mini-states along the gulf were further reflections of the mutual interests of the two powers.

A final element in the tragedy of Iran is the interruption and probable loss of vital intelligence facilities—facilities made even more critical after their loss in Turkey. These monitors provide crucial information on military developments in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union—and without them some State Department and CIA analysts believe that any strategic arms limitation treaty would become virtually unverifiable.

Lacking any cohesive principle around which a strong foreign policy might be organized, Carter has displayed a remarkable inability to define the nature and extent of America's foreign geopolitical interests. For some countries, like the People's Republic of China, the watchword is "simple reality"—the Carter version of *realpolitik*. For others, like Argentina and (sometimes) Iran, it's "human rights"—and never the twain shall meet.

Iran's demise illuminates the Carter Administration's policy paralysis. All at once, 18 months of human-rights chatter stopped. Then Carter, afraid to offend his liberal domestic coalition, said nothing—followed by his disastrous Dec. 7 prediction that the shah might not survive, followed by embarrassed expressions of support, followed by the dramatic dispatch of a carrier task force, followed by a command to halt the task force so that it was left cutting figure 8s in the Indian Ocean.

The plain fact is that beyond Carter's human-rights litmus test there has been very little in the way of hard-nosed calculations of strategy. When there has been, there has not been the courage to act decisively.

The shah's departure ushers in an era of uncertainty. It diminishes the moderate influence on Saudi policy, indirectly making it more difficult for Egypt and Israel to realize their long-sought peace. But, perhaps most damaging, it illustrates to the world a drastic lack of American resolve, an inability on the part of the United States to sense and act on its strategic interests, and it further devalues the currency of an American commitment to a friend and ally.

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